

**Statement on the Death of
General Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr.**

July 6, 2002

Two days ago, on July 4th, America lost a true hero when General Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr., died at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, DC. Throughout his career, General Davis served the cause of freedom with distinction and dignity. He will be sorely missed. On behalf of a grateful nation, Laura and I send our condolences to the Davis family.

We will remember General Davis most for his leadership of the legendary Tuskegee Airmen during World War II. The segregated African American 332d Fighter Group flew more than 15,000 sorties against the Nazi Luftwaffe, destroyed over 250 enemy aircraft, and never lost a single Allied plane flying under its escort protection. Davis' leadership and the dazzling success of his Tuskegee Airmen contributed greatly to the victory over fascism abroad—and to important victories over discrimination here at home, especially the desegregation of the Armed Services ordered by President Truman in 1948.

The quiet courage, discipline, and high achievement of the Tuskegee Airmen simply mirrored the qualities that Benjamin Davis, Jr., demonstrated throughout his career. A graduate of West Point, he was a recipient of the Silver Star and Distinguished Flying Cross and was the first African American in the Air Force to earn a star. He retired with the rank of Lieutenant General and was awarded his fourth star after his retirement in 1998. His passing on the date of our Nation's Independence underscores the independence and pride with which he served our Nation's highest ideals. General Davis left our country better than he found it and his legacy will endure for as long as Americans seek to protect—and perfect—our Union.

**Remarks on Presenting the
Congressional Medal of Honor
Posthumously to
Captain Humbert Versace**

July 8, 2002

Good afternoon, and welcome to the White House. It's a—this is a special occasion. I am honored to be a part of the gathering as we pay tribute to a true American patriot and a hero, Captain Humbert "Rocky" Versace.

Nearly four decades ago, his courage and defiance while being held captive in Vietnam cost him his life. Today it is my great privilege to recognize his extraordinary sacrifices by awarding him the Medal of Honor.

I appreciate Secretary Anthony Principi, the Secretary from the Department of Veteran Affairs, for being here. Thank you for coming, Tony. I appreciate Senator George Allen and Congressman Jim Moran. I want to thank Paul Wolfowitz, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, and General Pete Pace, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Army General Eric Shinseki—thank you for coming, sir. I appreciate David Hicks being here. He's the Deputy Chief of Chaplains for the United States Army.

I want to thank the entire Versace family for coming, three brothers and a lot of relatives, brothers, Dick and Mike and Steve, who's up here on the stage with me today. I appreciate the classmates and friends and supporters of Rocky for coming. I also want to thank the previous Medal of Honor recipients who are here with us today. That would be Harvey Barnum and Brian Thacker and Roger Donlon. Thank you all for coming.

Rocky grew up in this area and attended Gonzaga College High School, right here in Washington, DC. One of his fellow soldiers recalled that Rocky was the kind of person you only had to know a few weeks before you felt like you'd known him for years. Serving as an intelligence adviser in the Mekong Delta, he quickly befriended many of the

local citizens. He had that kind of personality. During his time there he was accepted into the seminary, with an eye toward eventually returning to Vietnam to be able to work with orphans.

Rocky was also a soldier's soldier, a West Point graduate, a Green Beret who lived and breathed the code of duty and honor and country. One of Rocky's superiors said that the term "gung ho" fit him perfectly. Others remember his strong sense of moral purpose and unbending belief in his principles.

As his brother Steve once recalled, "If he thought he was right, he was a pain in the neck." [Laughter] "If he knew he was right, he was absolutely atrocious." [Laughter]

When Rocky completed his one-year tour of duty, he volunteered for another tour. And 2 weeks before his time was up, on October the 29th, 1963, he set out with several companies of South Vietnamese troops, planning to take out a Viet Cong command post. It was a daring mission and an unusually dangerous one for someone so close to going home to volunteer for.

After some initial successes, a vastly larger Viet Cong force ambushed and overran Rocky's unit. Under siege and suffering from multiple bullet wounds, Rocky kept providing covering fire so that friendly forces could withdraw from the killing zone.

Eventually, he and two other Americans, Lieutenant Nick Rowe and Sergeant Dan Pitzer, were captured, bound, and forced to walk barefoot to a prison camp deep within the jungle. For much of the next 2 years, their home would be bamboo cages, 6 feet long, 2 feet wide, and 3 feet high. They were given little to eat and little protection against the elements. On nights when their netting was taken away, so many mosquitos would swarm their shackled feet it looked like they were wearing black socks.

The point was not merely to physically torture the prisoners but also to persuade them to confess to phony crimes and use their confessions for propaganda. But Rocky's captors clearly had no idea who they were dealing with. Four times he tried to escape, the first time crawling on his stomach because his leg injuries prevented him from walking. He insisted on giving no more information than required by the Geneva Convention and

cited the treaty, chapter and verse, over and over again.

He was fluent in English, French, and Vietnamese and would tell his guards to go to hell in all three. Eventually the Viet Cong stopped using French and Vietnamese in their indoctrination sessions, because they didn't want the sentries or the villagers to listen to Rocky's effective rebuttals to their propaganda. Rocky knew precisely what he was doing. By focusing his captors' anger on him; he made life a measure more tolerable for his fellow prisoners, who looked to him as a role model of principled resistance.

Eventually the Viet Cong separated Rocky from the other prisoners. Yet even in separation, he continued to inspire them. The last time they heard his voice, he was singing "God Bless America" at the top of his lungs.

On September the 26th, 1965, Rocky's struggle ended with his execution. In his too short life, he traveled to a distant land to bring the hope of freedom to the people he never met. In his defiance and later his death, he set an example of extraordinary dedication that changed the lives of his fellow soldiers who saw it firsthand. His story echoes across the years, reminding us of liberty's high price and of the noble passion that caused one good man to pay that price in full.

Last Tuesday would have been Rocky's 65th birthday. So today we award Rocky—Rocky Versace the first Medal of Honor given to an Army POW for actions taken during captivity in Southeast Asia. We thank his family for so great a sacrifice. And we commit our country to always remember what Rocky gave to his fellow prisoners, to the people of Vietnam, and to the cause of freedom.

Now, Major, please read the citation.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:07 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. Following the President's remarks, Maj. Paul Montanus, USMC, Marine Corps Aide to the President, read the citation.

The President's News Conference July 8, 2002

The President. Good afternoon. I hope you all enjoyed your weekend in Maine as